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4701 WILLARD AVENUE, CHEVY CHASE, MARYLAND 20815

(301) 656-4068

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FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS STAFF

PROGRAM ABC World News Tonight

STATION WJLA TV  
ABC Network

DATE August 21, 1985 7:00 PM CITY Washington, DC

SUBJECT Soviets Track Americans

TED KOPPEL: Nitrophenyl pentodianeol (?) is not the sort of chemical you would keep in your medicine cabinet. Indeed, the very fact that NPPD, as it's called, is capable of causing genetic mutations, maybe even cancer, is at the center of a hot new dispute between Washington and Moscow.

We have a series of reports, beginning with our correspondent in Moscow, Walter Rodgers.

WALTER RODGERS: U.S. citizens living in Moscow were summoned to the American Ambassador's residence tonight to be told they may have been contaminated with a potentially dangerous chemical substance used by the KGB, the Soviet secret police, to keep track of their whereabouts and their contacts in the Soviet Union. The State Department in Washington made this announcement:

CHARLES REDMAN: The substances in question, which have been applied indirectly to embassy personnel, leave deposits on the person or possessions of people with whom they have had contact. The United States deplors the Soviet Union's use of chemical substances against its diplomatic representatives in the U.S.S.R. We have protested the practice in the strongest terms and demanded that it be terminated immediately.

RODGERS: Anxious Americans who still are not sure of the extent to which they may have been contaminated or how to avoid future contamination reacted with fear and anger over the paucity of information they were given by U.S. officials.

JANE THATCHER: I don't feel reassured. No. I feel very puzzled and more fearful than I did when I came here.

STEVEN STRASSER: That was a dishonest briefing. They called us to warn us about this carcinogen floating around in the atmosphere, and they don't tell us where they found it.

RODGERS: The American Embassy here has obviously been the center of the KGB's chemical dusting, and several U.S. diplomats have been affected, although none is reported ill.

American officials here have tried to downplay the health hazards posed by the chemical NPPD. Although so little is known about it, they were not very reassuring. And a team of doctors is flying in from the United States to test the degree of contamination of American diplomats, businessmen, journalists, and their families.

JOHN MCWETHY: This is John McWethy in Washington.

U.S. officials describe the chemical agent NPPD as a clear powder, similar in appearance to this face powder, but stickier. And when rubbed into the skin, it becomes invisible. They suspect it was most commonly applied as an aerosol.

Intelligence officials say the powder was frequently detected in cars used by embassy personnel in Moscow in places where it might rub off on the hands: on the door handle, the steering wheel, the gearshift lever. And once on the hands, it would rub off on everything and everyone touched, leaving a chemical trail for the KGB to follow.

Intelligence analysts say such chemicals are being used to finger Soviets who meet clandestinely with American diplomats gathering intelligence. The diplomats most frequently targeted were those fluent in Russian, those most likely to be American spies.

WILLIAM COLBY: The Soviets are going to use every gadget they can think of to follow people in our embassy. They're paranoid about the possibility of penetration into their society from the outside.

MCWETHY: Both the CIA and FBI also use chemical tracking agents, but officials claim not any that are health hazards, and never on diplomats.

Law enforcement people, for example, commonly mark money with chemicals that can be detected with ultraviolet light, chemicals that rub off on the hands of those who handle the cash.

State Department officials say the Soviets used NPPD sporadically during the 1970s, then stopped all use in 1982. In the meantime, laboratory tests in the U.S. showed the chemical

might pose a health hazard.

In the last four months, the Soviets began using it again, this time heavily.

This is not the first time those who work in the American Embassy in Moscow have been subjected to potential health hazards courtesy of the KGB. Soviet microwave radiation has bombarded the embassy for years, with uncertain health effects.

MALCOLM TOON: They're behaving just as they always have, in a very nasty and unpleasant way.

REP. DAN MICA: I think we may have to consider closing embassies in all the East Bloc countries if we don't get some answers.

MCWETHY: At the Soviet Embassy in Washington today there was an answer to one question, "Did you do it?"

IGOR BUGAY: No. It's nonsense.

REPORTER: It's nonsense?

BUGAY: Yeah, it is.

MCWETHY: As far as American officials are concerned, there is no doubt the Soviets did do it. What remains in question is how prominently this will figure in the Reagan-Gorbachev summit in November; and, more importantly, how serious the health side effects might be to those who have been exposed.

GEORGE STRAIT: Chemically, NPPD is an imposing compound.

It's been used as an industrial dye. It can irritate and discolor the skin and cause nausea. There's no proof that it can penetrate the skin and cause cancer or birth defects, but independent chemists aren't sure and are split on the potential health hazards of NPPD.

DR. JOHN AMBRE: In small amounts, it probably wouldn't produce any noticeable effects at all.

DR. EUGENE ASHBY: It's a potential carcinogen, in that a person absorbing enough of it could contract a cancer.

STRAIT: Similar to but not the same substance as this commercially produced identification ink, NPPD is light-sensitive. It will glow when ultraviolet light is shined on it.

DR. ASHBY: And that's why that's a good tracking agent, because it has the chemical characteristics that can be observed in very small concentration.

STRAIT: Experience with NPPD in this country is limited. It's currently being studied at the National Institutes of Health. Researchers predict no health problems short-term. But long-term, experts worry that U.S. citizens and diplomats will find out that their jobs in the Soviet Union are more hazardous than they imagined.

KOPPEL: Joining us here tonight in Washington, Walter Stoessel, a former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union.

Ambassador Stoessel, why go public with this kind of a charge?

WALTER STOESSEL: Well, I think there comes a point when we have to inform our people in Moscow, in the embassy, and also American residents living there, that there is this potential danger. And once you do that, the news goes out. So I think this was the reason for the timing.

KOPPEL: To what degree does this kind of thing naturally take place between governments like the United States and the Soviet Union?

STOESSEL: Well, I don't think there's anything natural about it, particularly this particular substance. Of course, surveillance goes on, tapping of phones, that sort of thing. That's sort of accepted. But I think what the Soviets have done here, as they did in the case of the microwaves, shows a disregard of the potential health hazards of the materials they are using.

KOPPEL: All right, a final question, then. To what degree, then, can this sort of thing actually have an effect on policy? We do have that big summit coming up in just a few months.

STOESSEL: Well, I think it certainly can influence the tone of the discussion, the atmosphere. I would think this would be raised at meetings with the Soviets. We have protested. We want it to stop. We hope it will be stopped.

This, however, does not mean that the summit should not go on. We're very serious about that and still hope for a constructive result.

KOPPEL: Ambassador Stoessel, thank you.